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Videoconferencing at the United Nations

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The General Assembly, in its resolution 56/253 of 24 December 2001, requested the Secretary-General to study comprehensively the use of videoconferencing as a means of communication within the United Nations and to report thereon to the Assembly at its fifty-seventh session.

The present report provides a comprehensive review of videoconferencing at the United Nations over the last two biennia, 1998-1999 and 2000-2001, and for the current biennium 2002-2003. In addition, the report presents an overview of new and emerging videoconferencing requirements, which can further enhance the efficiency of the Organization.

* A/57/150.

** The present report was delayed due to the need to ensure that consultations with the various parties concerned were completed.

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I. Introduction

1. By its resolution 56/253 of 24 December 2001, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to study comprehensively the use of videoconferencing as a means of communication within the United Nations and to report thereon at its fifty-seventh session.

2. Accordingly, a review was undertaken of the use of videoconferencing at the United Nations Headquarters and at offices away from Headquarters, as well as the current usage of videoconferencing in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the field missions. In this regard, statistical information on the usage of videoconferencing by the Secretariat during the last two biennia and projections for the current biennium have been gathered for both Headquarters and the offices away from Headquarters. In addition, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations has provided an estimate of the usage for the current biennium between Department's Situation Centre and the field.

3. Videoconferencing capabilities are a part of the overall information and communication technology strategy, on which a separate report is being presented to the General Assembly. That strategy applies information and communication technologies to:

- Increase the efficiency of decision-making and administrative processes
- Facilitate the sharing of the Organization's institutional knowledge
- Provide higher quality services to governing bodies and Member States

4. The strategy ensures that investments in information and communication technology are aligned with the programmes of the Organization in order to ensure higher quality of services and to provide added efficiency to its administrative and management processes.

5. The complex organizational structure and the geographical arrangement of the Secretariat (eight major duty stations, including Headquarters) together with the large number of field missions makes the importance of communication an important factor in delivering efficient and effective programmes.

6. The use of videoconferencing has grown substantially over the last several years, and the requirement for additional capacity and resources will continue to increase in the coming years. So far, the additional costs related to this new activity have been absorbed mainly through redeployment of resources within the Information Technology Services Division at Headquarters. The infrastructure, equipment and staffing will, however, need to be upgraded and reinforced to keep pace with the demand for services.

II. Overall trends

7. Although experiments with the use of remote videoconferencing took place in the late 1980s, the use of videoconferencing was formally introduced at the United Nations in 1995, when the need arose for videoconferencing between the Security Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna.

8. Over the three biennia covered by the present study, the use of videoconferencing within the Secretariat, both in terms of the number of videoconferences and the total number of videoconference hours, has grown substantially, by 152 per cent and 128 per cent, respectively, (see annexes I and II). The review shows that many offices use videoconferencing as an essential tool in consultation and decision-making since it obviates the need for travel. For instance, the Senior Management Group meetings bring together the Secretary-General, the heads of offices away from Headquarters, and the heads of funds and programmes. The Office of Human Resources Management uses videoconferencing for interviews of applicants; the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts uses it for reviewing budget proposals with the offices away from Headquarters, budget reviews with the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the offices away from Headquarters, and for coordination of the Integrated Management Information System; and the Office of Central Support Services uses it for the meetings of the Information and Communications Technology Board and Common Services Inter-agency Network of Facilities Managers. On two occasions during the last biennium (June 2000 and October 2001), the Secretary-General communicated with the Security Council by videoconference from Geneva. The Security Council is looking in the future to videoconference with the

Secretary-General and other high ranking officials away from New York, including Special Representatives of the Secretary General, Force Commanders and other high-level representatives. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations uses videoconferencing for briefings and discussions with the field missions. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs uses it to support the Executive Committee of the Economic and Social Council. The Headquarters infrastructure is also made available to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) when it holds its Global Staff Forum from multiple locations around the world.

9. The chart presented in annex I provides the total number of hours by type of videoconference held at the Secretariat (Headquarters and offices away from Headquarters) for the three biennia, excluding the videoconferences held between the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the field missions. Annex II provides the total number of videoconferences held each biennium by type and also the total number of hours each biennium by type. In addition, annex III details the Secretariat sites covered by this review, the peacekeeping missions and the maximum number of concurrent videoconferences that can be held by location (entity, city and region).

10. There are three classified types of videoconferencing systems: (a) dedicated boardroom systems; (b) portable/transportable systems; and (c) desktop systems. The videoconferencing service within the United Nations is currently based on technology involving large boardroom and mid-sized portable/transportable systems. These systems provide the ability to involve many people, from two or more locations, to participate in virtual face-to-face briefings, meetings, lectures and interviews, all without the need for staff to travel to one particular location. Headquarters has the capacity to provide up to nine simultaneous videoconferences with the existing equipment. Each videoconference can be linked by use of an external bridge to multiple locations. The majority of other locations have the capacity to hold only one videoconference at a time, with the exception of Geneva (the United Nations Office at Geneva, the Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), which can handle six simultaneous videoconferences, and Bangkok (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), Nairobi (United Nations Office at Nairobi) and Santiago (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), which each have the capacity to hold two simultaneously. At the United Nations, the videoconference systems deployed to date are being used primarily for the following purposes:

- Senior Management Group meetings
- Task force and executive committee meetings
- Departmental, Agency, Fund and Programme meetings
- Conference meetings for special sessions, forums and summits
- Economic and Social Council
- Budget meetings (including the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions)
- Human resource planning meetings
- Interviews
- Peacekeeping operations meetings
- Miscellaneous (Security Council, inter-agency networks, distance learning, missions to the United Nations, etc.)

III. Department of Peacekeeping Operations

11. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations estimates that it holds about 650 videoconferences per year. The Department mainly establishes links between the Situation Centre in New York and the various missions in order to hold briefings and discussions and also sometimes to carry out interviews and training. In the future, it expects to continue to expand its use to several conference rooms. The Department also proposes to install a video bridge at the United Nations Logistics Base (UNLB) in Brindisi, Italy, which will facilitate the use of videoconferencing between the Department and the field.

IV. Technical standards for videoconferencing

12. Presently, the United Nations uses equipment based on the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) T-H.320 standard, which details the telecommunication equipment and protocol standards. The underlying communications infrastructure used to support the service is a mixture of Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) circuits, provided by commercial carriers, and the United Nations-leased satellite capacity. ITU has promulgated a new overall standard of T-H.323 (Internet Protocol), which has been accepted as the worldwide standard by the information and communications technology industry in 2001 and the trend is now towards the use of the Internet Protocol (IP)-based videoconferencing. There is also a growing demand within the United Nations for IP-based videoconferencing. This is due to the many features and lower cost of that service, which can be used by accessing the public Internet instead of a proprietary network.

13. Most equipment currently used by the United Nations is incompatible with the T-H.323 standard and cannot, therefore, support IP-based videoconferencing. The deployment of T-H.323 IP-based desktop videoconferencing service at the United Nations will necessitate a series of network infrastructure upgrades and enhancements at Headquarters and offices away from Headquarters to provide the required connectivity.

V. Desktop systems — technical standards and infrastructure

14. Desktop systems have multiple uses. They provide the ability to have real-time interactive collaborative sessions over the web, for example using electronic whiteboards, to share applications such as PowerPoint presentations and to edit documents in real-time. To include mixed-media type documents during a videoconference session is a new and pressing requirement in the United Nations, in particular for conferences held around the world. Conferencing tools that deliver such functionality, including desktop systems, fall under the ITU T-H.323 and T.120 standards (data collaboration). Such tools are regarded as key elements, which can contribute significantly to improving efficiency in the organization under the Secretary-General's information and communications technology strategy.

15. These systems dramatically increase the demand on the network capacity and require upgrade of the local area network (LAN), the wide area network (WAN) and the Internet. While inexpensive desktop videoconferencing client software is readily available, the LAN at most United Nations offices will require additional network capacity and management services in order to support the T-H.323 traffic over the existing wiring. Additionally, network infrastructure enhancements will have to be installed to enable inter-operability between existing T-H.320-based boardroom systems and T-H.323-based desktop systems as a precursor to the deployment of desktop system services and data collaboration. When completed, these enhancements will enable staff using desktop systems to participate in videoconferences with existing boardroom systems either on the LAN or via the Internet.

16. As the LAN infrastructure is upgraded at Headquarters, desktop systems can be introduced with all the benefits. The introduction of this technology will facilitate knowledge sharing and result in more efficient work practices. Some areas that may benefit immediately from desktop systems include:

- Highly dispersed project teams spanning Headquarters, offices away from Headquarters, and field missions
- Department of Economic and Social Affairs (preparation and support conferences)
- Interviews
- Peacekeeping operations meetings
- Information and communication technology board and task forces
- Ad hoc working groups in the United Nations common system
- Security briefings

VI. Remote interpretation

17. A detailed study of the costs involved in remote interpretation will be submitted in a separate report to the fifty-seventh session of the General Assembly. The Committee on Conferences requested the Secretariat to

assess future advances in the videoconferencing and communications areas to determine whether they could provide solutions to outstanding technical problems of remote interpretation.

VII. Budgetary considerations

18. The limited level of budgetary provisions for information and communication technology in the current programme budget, following adjustments made to proposals at the fifty-sixth session of the Assembly, means that there are presently no resources available to upgrade or improve the existing equipment during this biennium.

VIII. Capital Master Plan

19. Within the framework of the Capital Master Plan, all Headquarters conference rooms and the meetings rooms will have their wiring infrastructure upgraded to enable videoconferencing from each location. Once the Capital Master Plan is implemented, and rooms have been equipped with the necessary infrastructure, the time currently taken by staff to set up equipment will no longer be required.

IX. Videoconferencing through 2005

20. Given the limited capacity of available servicing, currently some requests for videoconferences have to be rescheduled, while for others, reduced technical support is provided. In order to have additional capacity to meet the growing demand and to adopt the new videoconferences standards, as well as to introduce desktop systems and provide greater possibilities for collaborative communication between distant locations, existing equipment and infrastructure need to be upgraded. Likewise, technical staffing support needs to be strengthened to provide interoperability between the existing equipment and the new standard.

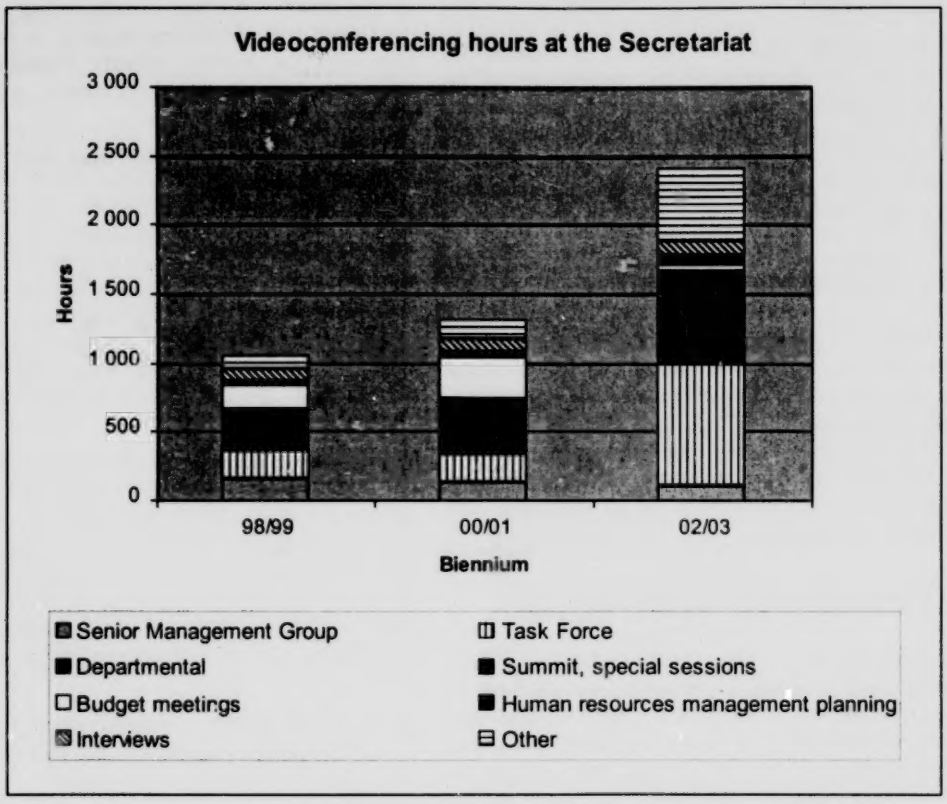
X. Conclusion

21. As mentioned in paragraph 3, videoconferencing is a component of the overall information and communication technology strategy, which is being driven by the programme of reform of the Secretary-General. As such, its objective is to make the decision-making and administrative processes more effective, to facilitate the sharing of the Organization's institutional knowledge and to provide higher quality services to governing bodies and Member States. In order to assist in this process, the videoconferencing technology in the United Nations Secretariat needs to be kept up-to-date with the current industry standards and have sufficient capacity to keep pace with the ever increasing demands.

22. **The General Assembly may wish to take note of the present report.**

Annex I

Total number of hours, by type of videoconference, held at Headquarters during the biennia 1998/1999, 2000/2001 and 2002/2003



Annex II

Total number, and total number of hours, of videoconferencing during the biennia 1998/1999, 2000/2001 and 2002/2003

	Number of videoconferences			*Total hours*		
Type	*1998/1999*	*2000/2001*	*2002/2003*	*1998/1999*	*2000/2001*	*2002/2003*
Senior Management Group	102	98	73	152	123	100
Task Force	129	134	698	211	208	891
Departmental	127	183	375	98	148	537
Summit, special sessions	55	44	69	204	255	146
Budget meetings	23	33	53	174	318	46
Human resources management planning	18	67	46	26	37	69
Interviews	68	60	81	96	93	93
Other	159	286	318	99	132	538
Total	**681**	**905**	**1 713**	**1 060**	**1 314**	**2 420**

Annex III

Videoconference capacity by location

Entity	*City*	*Location*	*Videoconferences/ maximum number of concurrent videoconferences*
United Nations Secretariat sites			
Headquarters	New York	United States of America	9
Economic Commission for Africa	Addis Ababa	Ethiopia	1
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific	Bangkok	Thailand	2
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia	Beirut	Lebanon	1
United Nations Office at Geneva	Geneva	Switzerland	4
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights	Geneva	Switzerland	1
United Nations Office at Nairobi	Nairobi	Kenya	2
United Nations Office at Vienna	Vienna	Austria	1
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean	Santiago	Chile	2
United Nations Conference on Trade and Development	Geneva	Switzerland	1
Peacekeeping missions			
UNOMIG	Sukhumi	Georgia	1
MINUGUA	Guatemala City	Guatemala	1
MINURSO	Layounne	Western Sahara	1
MONUC	Kinshasa	Democratic Republic of the Congo	1
UNAMSIL	Freetown	Sierra Leone	1
UNIFIL	Naqoura	Lebanon	1
UNIKOM	Umm Qasr	Iraq	1
United Nations Logistics Base	Brindisi	Italy	1
UNMEE	Addis Ababa	Ethiopia	1

Entity	*City*	*Location*	*Videoconferences/ maximum number of concurrent videoconferences*
UNMEE	Asmara	Eritrea	1
UNFICYP	Nicosia	Cyprus	1
UNMIBH	Sarajevo	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1
UNMIK	Pristina	Kosovo	1
UNMOGIP	Rawalpindi	Pakistan	1
UNTAET	Dili	East Timor	1
UNTSO	Jerusalem	Israel	1
UNDOF	Camp Faour	Golan Heights	1
UNAMA	Kabul	Afghanistan	1